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ABSTRACT

Communicating values is at the heart of education. Intertwined with the processes and procedures of schooling, a host of values are taught every day. Education, therefore, carries with it a social and moral imperative. If we are to help students avoid moral bankruptcy, we cannot have a value-neutral education. A basic feature of the social and moral imperative of education is to help students see the connectedness of all things--social, personal, religious--to the past, to the natural world, to each other, and to the eternal. Students learn about connections through a curriculum that focuses on a core of common learning and includes our shared use of symbols (language), our sense of history (a common heritage incorporating both Western and non-Western studies), our relationship with nature, and our shared activities of work, leisure, and religion. Through a core of common learning, through the way we organize the school, by the climate we create, by the care with which we educate our teachers, and by the example they set, we convey social and moral imperatives to students. (Author)

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The Educated Heart:
The Social and Moral Imperatives of Education

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ABSTRACT

SOCIAL AND MORAL IMPERATIVES OF EDUCATION

ERNEST L. BOYER

Communicating values is at the heart of education. Intertwined with the processes and procedures of schooling, a host of values are taught every day. Education, therefore, carries with it a social and moral imperative. If we are to help our students avoid moral bankruptcy, we cannot have a value-neutral education.

A basic feature of the social and moral imperative of education is to help students see the connectedness of all things--social, personal, religious-- to the past, to the natural world, to each other, and to the eternal.

Students learn about connections through a curriculum that focuses on a core of common learning and includes our shared use of symbols (language), our sense of history (a common heritage incorporating both western and non-western studies), our membership in groups and institutions, our relationship with nature, our shared activities of work and leisure, and religion.

Through a core of common learning, through the way we organize the school, by the climate we create, by the care with which we educate our teachers, by the example they set, we convey social and moral imperatives to our students.

The Educated Heart:
The Social and Moral Imperatives of Education

I am very pleased to be with you today.

America's non-public schools have enriched immeasurably the quality of our nation's life. And at this moment when we're pushing aggressively for excellence in public education, it's essential that the enormously valuable contribution of independent schools be acknowledged and vigorously reaffirmed.

o o o o

This afternoon I've been asked to talk about social and moral imperatives--one of education's most important and most neglected issues.

We hear a lot of talk these days about more Carnegie units, about raising academic standards. But where in all of this are students? What about their expectations, their values and beliefs?

When the American sociologist Daniel Bell was asked to give the Hobhouse Memorial Lecture at the London School of Economics in 1977, he chose as his title, "The Return of the Sacred?" Significantly, he placed a question mark at the end of that provoking title.

In this lecture, Bell discussed what he saw as a dramatic resurgence of religious belief in modern culture. And he quoted the great German sociologist Max Weber who wrote at the end of the 19th century:

- With the progress of science and technology, man has stopped believing in magic powers, in spirits and demons; he has lost his sense of prophecy and, above all, his sense of the sacred.

- Reality has become dreary, flat, and utilitarian, leaving a great void in the souls of men which they seek to fill by furious activity. . . (1)

But, as Bell went on to note, this inexorable "progress" of science and technology shifted sharply in the twentieth century.

- Man's reason did not prevent the Holocaust or the mushroom shaped cloud under which we huddle.

- The flatness and dreariness of a wholly utilitarian and secularized society, of which Max Weber wrote, has taken its toll on the human spirit.

Today we are rediscovering that the sense of the sacred is inextricably interwoven with the most basic of human impulses, the most primal human experiences of birth and love and death.

George Steiner captured the spirit of our time when he wrote that a man who is intellectually advanced can, at the same time, be morally bankrupt. Quite simply, we cannot live by bread alone.

I

This brings me to the crux of my remarks today. How can we, through formal education, help our students avoid the moral bankruptcy of which George Steiner spoke?

One approach is the proposed school prayer legislation-- an idea many Americans find enormously appealing since most of us have deep religious roots.

But frankly, I'm concerned that an act of Congress may not be an adequate, or even an appropriate response to our dilemma.

Twenty years ago, the nation's highest court ruled that a state-sanctioned prayer could not be a required ritual in the public schools. And I feel that all who care about religious freedom should be respectful of the sensitive distinction the court drew between government authority and individual conscience.

Throughout history, the consciences of believers have been violated and religious minorities punished because their faith did not conform to state-approved religion. Almost everyone agrees that prayer is far too personal and acts of piety far too sacred to be governmentally imposed. And yet, if the current push for school prayer leads to officially sanctioned acts of formal worship in the nation's public classrooms, we run the risk of renewed tension and abuse.

If, on the other hand, we simply introduce--without guidance--a moment of silence in the classroom we risk trivializing one of man's most sacred acts and suggesting to our children that prayer is nothing more than an awkward interruption.

Students are already free to pray every moment, every day. And as someone recently observed, so long as there are final exams we'll have prayer in public schools.

Seriously, it seems to me, that prayer should remain the voluntary act of the individual conscience, guided by the church, not the state, and guided most especially by parents and the home.

o o o o

But here a word of caution. We cannot have a value-neutral education.

Communicating values is at the very heart of education, whether it takes place in a Catholic school, a Jewish school, a military academy, a Baptist institution or Public School 118.

- o Schools teach that orderliness is a vir ; they teach that one should respect the work of others and that it's good to start and stop on time.

- o Schools even teach conformity and docility, some critics would insist.

In a thousand subtle, and not so subtle ways, we teach a host of values every day.

II

Still, values in education have to do with something more than process and procedure--or even a moment of silence in the classroom.

I conclude that the social and moral imperative of education is to help all students gain perspective--to help them see the connectedness of things, an insight that touches the very foundation of morality--social, personal and religious.

Dr. Lewis Thomas said on one occasion that these are not the best of times for the human mind. He said that:

> o We are ignorant about how we work, about where we fit in, and most of all about the enormous, imponderable system of life in which we are embedded as working parts . . . (2)

He concluded that:

> o If this century does not slip forever through our fingers it will be because learning will have directed us away from our splintered dumbness and will have helped us focus on our common goals. (2)

While Dr. Thomas may overstate the case a bit, his conclusions cannot be ignored.

He's suggesting that all worthy values we pursue in education are best expressed in the imperative I call "connections".

- This is true whether the connections relate us to the past,

- whether they relate us to the natural world,

- whether they relate us to each other,

- or whether they relate to the eternal--those occasions described by the great Jewish theologian, Martin Buber as special "moments of silent depth".

III

How can our students realize this larger vision?

First, students can learn about connections through the curriculum we teach--through a core of common learning that focuses on the larger human community to which we are all unalterably connected.

In the Carnegie high school report we define the common core as:

- o our shared use of symbols,
- o our sense of history,
- o our membership in groups and institutions,
- o our relationship with nature,
- o and our shared activities of work and leisure.

We propose these central themes because they shape the life of every individual.

o o o o

Consider, for example, our shared use of symbols.

In the Carnegie report we say that language is our most essential social function, that the sending and receiving of messages separates human beings from all other forms of life. And, we say that it's through the quality of our <u>language</u> that the quality of our <u>lives</u> are shaped.

Wayne Booth, of the University of Chicago, wrote on one occasion that all too often our efforts to speak and listen seem to be vicious cycles, moving downward.

But Booth went on to say that ". . . We have all experienced moments when the spiral moved upward, when one party's effort to listen and speak just a little bit better produced a similar response, making it possible to try a bit harder--and on up the spiral to moments of genuine understanding." (3)

I have a more personal, more painful illustration to present.

- While Chancellor of the State University of New York, I was about to speak to faculty from across the state. The board of trustees was in attendance. It was high drama. Just then, 350 students moved in through the swinging doors with placards, chanting slogans, demanding that I help free a group of students who had been arrested on another campus. The microphone was grabbed, and for almost an hour we went back and forth.

  Finally, I concluded we were not listening to each other; the meeting was in shambles. (Why it took me sixty minutes to discover that reality I'll never know. Slow learners are always with us.) Even worse, I concluded

(and this I think is the crucial point) I was talking, not to people, but to a faceless mob.

I left the platform and walked into the crowd. I began talking with a single student. I asked her name, I asked about her family, I asked her why she was so angry. Soon several others joined us. I described how I truly felt and what I could and could not do with integrity, at that moment. To make the story short, that session ended. A compromise was reached, and in the process I'd learned to know some most attractive students.

Our shared use of symbols connect us to each other. And should force us to consider the quality of the messages we send.

o o o o

Now, let me say a word about our connections to the natural world.

Every educated person should understand that there are no solitary free-living creatures. They should discover that every form of life is dependent on all other forms and respectfully consider the ecology of the planet earth.

- The harsh truth is that the human race continues to expand at a rate of 200,000 people every day--that's 73 million more people every year.

- And every day more than 800 million people face gnawing hunger, living literally from hand to mouth. Tensions over resources grow more acute, and the quality of our environment is threatened.

The questions, then, are these:

- Where will we get our food, and how can it be appropriately distributed?

- What about our energy supply, and how can it be equitably shared?

- How can we reduce the poisons in the atmosphere?

- And, can we have a proper balance between population and the life support system of this planet Earth?

As students carefully examine transcendent issues such as these they will see connections and gain, I believe, a moral and ethical perspective.

o o o o

Now, let's talk about the significance of history.

The study of history provides a kind of lifeline across the scary chasm of our contemporary situation. And all students should understand that, while we each have our separate roots, we also have a common heritage that shapes our lives today.

Such a study should include not just our own traditions but non-western studies. Students should learn to respect the values other people hold.

Such study also should include religion.

- Students cannot know the history of art, for example, without discovering religious inspiration--from the Hindu cave paintings of Ajanta and the Buddhist art of Asai to the Western art tradition--from the Greeks and the Egyptians to the majestic Cathedrals of the Middle Ages that so inspired Henry Adams and Chagall--and a host of others.

- Students cannot know literature without understanding how religion has shaped the world's great writers, from the historians and playwrights of ancient Greece--Homer, Aeschylus, Euripides--to writers of our own day from T.S. Eliot to John Updike to Gabriel Garcia Marquez to I.B. Singer.

- Students cannot know music without grasping the power of religion for performers and composers ranging from the

amazingly gifted Hildegarde von Bingen, the German Benedictine nun of the 12th century, to Leonard Bernstein.

At every turn--in sociology, psychology, anthropology and even economics--one must deal with the reality of religious faith.

- There is, for example, William James' great study The Varieties of Religious Experience or Max Weber's classic work, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism. (4)

The quest for common learning is, quite simply, unimaginable, without knowing that the sense of the sacred, the search for enduring values, have been central threads in the very fabric of human experience.

Yet in many schools a blanket of silence has smothered this essential study. It's been ten years since the U.S. Department of Education surveyed the study of religion in public education. At that time, only 642 of the over 15,000 high schools in the nation had courses in comparative religion, religious studies or the Bible. And only about .2 percent of the public school students were so enrolled. Today there's no evidence that anything has changed. (5)

In his concurring opinion in the 1963 Supreme Court decision on prayer in schools, Justice Arthur Goldberg said:

- Neither the state nor this Court can or should ignore the significance of the fact that a vast portion of our people believe in and worship God and that many of our legal, political and personal values derive historically from religious teachings.

- And it seems clear to me, Justice Goldberg continued ...that the Court would recognize the propriety of...the teaching <u>about</u> religion, as distinguished from the teaching <u>of</u> religion, in the public schools. (6)

I'm suggesting that students should move beyond the disciplines to examine those consequential human experiences that connect them to all others. And that through, a core of common learning, we convey social and moral imperatives to our students.

IV

Second, we convey values to our students by the way we organize the school, by the climate we create.

- Small schools can more easily help students form relationships with others, but often they do not take advantage of their smallness.

- For large schools, building "community" may be more difficult to achieve.

In the Carnegie report we suggest establishing "schools within the school"--places where students can interact more closely with each other--and with teachers.

- During our study we found a school we call Rosemont High--a suburban institution with 2,000 students.

- Here a community of one hundred students and five teachers had been organized within the larger setting. One young woman talked about feeling lost and faceless during her freshman year in the "downstairs school" (the term used to describe to the total school). In the smaller unit she had gained confidence and a sense of self she said.

If education is to exercise a moral force in society the process must take place in a moral context. Students should learn that true communities are held together, not by pressure or coercion, but by reasonable regulations, by simple acts of kindness and by the respect group members have for one other.

Creating a true spirit of community within the school is a social and moral imperative of education.

V

In the end, of course, teaching matters most. Great teachers have a message to convey. Great teachers communicate with care. But above all great teachers are sensitive and self-revealing.

- During our school visits, I walked unannounced into a sixth grade classroom in an inner-city school in New Haven. The students were clustered around the teacher's desk. Moving closer I discovered they were reading, and enthusiastically discussing, Charles Dickens' Oliver Twist.

- Every child knew the good guys and the bad guys of the story and they were all cheering for Oliver as he struggled for survival in an urban jungle. In that classroom a miracle occurred.

- There was a great climate and a great teacher who had, quite literally, brought 19th century London to New Haven. Through great literature, enduring values were being deeply probed.

It is the great teacher who teaches integrity by example, who makes connections between the curriculum, and the convictions of the student.

These, too, are urgent imperatives of education.

VI

Finally, a student should see connections between what they learn and how they live.

John Gardner said on one occasion that "the deepest threat to the integrity of any community is an incapacity on the part of the citizens to lend themselves to any worthy common purposes." Gardner goes on to reflect on "the barrenness of a life that encompasses nothing beyond the self." (7)

During our study I became deeply troubled by the attitude of many of the students. And, it occurred to me that we have not just a school problem--but a youth problem in this nation.

- o I was troubled that it's possible for teenagers to finish high school yet never be asked to participate responsibly in life,

- o never be encouraged to spend time with older people who may be lonely,

- o never help a child who has not learned to read, or even be encouraged to clean up the litter on the street.

In our report we propose a new Carnegie unit--a service requirement for all students.

- o During each of their four high school years, students would do volunteer work in or out of the school.

- They could tutor younger students or volunteer to help in the cafeteria at school.

- They could move beyond the school to libraries, parks, hospitals, museums, nursing homes, day-care centers, synagogues, or churches.

- Students could fulfill this service requirement evenings, during the summer, and weekends

Many private schools such as Brooklyn Friends School in New York City, have been doing this for years. "Service" has also become a program in selected public institutions.

- At Metro High School in St. Louis, we met one young man who spoke movingly of what he learned while working on the "graveyard shift" (12 midnight to 7 a.m.) in the emergency room of a medical center.

- "I learned a lot this past summer. When a little three-year old girl goes into seizures and they found out she had meningitis and died that morning, you learn to feel for people."

A service term for all students would uniquely bind the nation's youth. They would move beyond their own separate interests and together see the connection between the classroom and the needs of people.

Conclusion

This is a special moment for American education. Reform is the order of the day. But in the rush to tighten standards we dare not overlook the most essential issue--teaching values to our students.

Students should acquire information. But they should also gain perspective, developing what I called on another occasion the "educated heart".

- Through a core of common learning, students should see beyond the academic fragmentation, catching a glimpse of the universal experiences that bind us all together.

- Through a supportive climate at the school, students should learn what the true spirit of community is all about.

- Through great teachers, students should discover that what they learn shapes their own values and convictions.

- And through voluntary service all students should begin to understand that to be truly human, one must <u>serve</u>.

Nearly forty years ago Mark Van Doren wrote:

> The connectedness of things is what the educator contemplates to the limit of his capacity. . . The student who can begin early in life to think of things as connected . . . has begun the life of learning. (8)

Helping students see the connectedness of things, I conclude, is the social and moral imperative of education.

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